

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:18 a.m. at the Pentagon. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast

February 2, 1995

Thank you, Martin Lancaster, for your incredible devotion to this prayer breakfast and for all the work you have done to make it a success. To Vice President and Mrs. Gore and to the Members of Congress and the Supreme Court, the Governors, the distinguished leaders of previous administrations, and of course, to all of our foreign guests who are here and my fellow Americans: Hillary and I look forward to this day every year with much anticipation. It always gives me new energy and new peace of mind. But today has been a special day for me.

It's always wonderful to see our friend Billy Graham back here. This is the 40th of 43 prayer breakfasts he has attended. I'd say he's been faithful to this as he has to everything else in his life, and we are all the richer for it.

It was wonderful to be with Andy Young again. He stayed with us last evening at the White House, and we relived some old times and talked about the future. None of us could fail to be moved today by the power of his message, the depth of his love for his wonderful wife, who blessed so many of us with her friendship. And I'm sure he inspired us all.

I also want to say a special word of thanks to my friend Janice Sjostrand for coming here all the way from Arkansas. You know, one of the greatest things about being Governor of my State is I got to hear her sing about once a month instead of once in a blue moon. And I miss you, and I'm glad to hear you today. Thank you.

We have heard a lot of words today of great power. There is very little I can add to them. But let me say that, in this age, which the Speaker of the House is always reminding us is the information age—an exciting time; a time of personal computers, not mainframes; a time when we are going to be judged by how smart we work, not just how hard we work—the power of words is

greater than ever before. So by any objective standard the problems we face today, while profound, are certainly not greater than they were in the Great Depression, or in the Second World War, or when Mr. Lincoln made those statements when he left his home in Illinois to become President that Governor Engler quoted, or when George Washington suffered defeat after defeat until, finally, we were able to win by persistence our freedom. No, they are not, these times, as difficult as they are, more difficult than those.

What makes them more difficult is the power of words, the very source of our liberation, of all of our possibility and all of our potential for growth. The communications revolution gives words not only the power to lift up and liberate, the power to divide and destroy as never before—just words—to darken our spirits and weaken our resolve, divide our hearts. So I say, perhaps the most important thing we should take out of Andy Young's wonderful message about what we share in common is the resolve to clear our heads and our hearts and to use our words more to build up and unify and less to tear down and divide.

We are here because we are all the children of God, because we know we have all fallen short of God's glory, because we know that no matter how much power we have, we have it but for a moment. And in the end, we can only exercise it well if we see ourselves as servants, not sovereigns.

We see sometimes the glimmer of this great possibility: When, after hundreds of years, the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland decide that it may be time to stop killing each other; when after 27 years, Nelson Mandela walks out of his jail cell and a couple of years later is the President of a free country from a free election; when we see the miraculous reaching out across all the obstacles in the Middle East. God must have been telling us something when he created the three great monotheistic religions of the world in one little patch and then had people fight with each other for every century after that. Maybe we have seen the beginning of the end of that, in spite of all the difficulty. But it never happened unless the power of words become instruments of elevation and liberation.

So we must work together to tear down barriers, as Andy Young has worked his whole life. We must do it with greater civility. In Romans, St. Paul said, "Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all; do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good." There's not a person in this room that hasn't failed in that admonition, including me. But I'm going to leave here today determined to live more by it.

And we must finally be humble, all of us, in whatever position we have not only because, as Andy reminded us, we're just here for a little while not only in our positions but on this Earth, but because we know, as St. Paul said in Corinthians, that we see through a glass darkly, and we will never see clearly until our life is over. We will never have the full truth, the whole truth. Even the facts, as Andy said—I thought that was a brilliant thing—the flesh and blood of our lives, the facts we think we know, even they do not tell us the whole truth. The mystery of life.

So, my fellow Americans and my fellow citizens of the world, let us leave this place renewed, in a spirit of civility and humility, and a determination not to use the power of our words to tear down.

I was honored to say in the State of the Union last week that none of us can change our yesterdays, but all of us can change our tomorrows. That, surely, is the wisdom of the message we have heard on this day.

Lastly, let me ask you to pray for the President that he will have the wisdom to change when he is wrong, the courage to stay the course when he is right, and somehow, somehow, the grace of God not to use the power of words at a time in human history when words are more omnipresent and more powerful than ever before to divide and to destroy but instead to pierce to the truth, to the heart, to the best that is in us all.

Thank you all, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 9:20 a.m. at the Washington Hilton Hotel and Towers. In his remarks, he referred to Martin Lancaster, chair, National Prayer Breakfast; evangelist Billy Graham; former Ambassador Andrew Young; and singer Janice Sjostrand.

Interview With Religious Journalists February 2, 1995

The President. Well, I'm glad to see you all and welcome you here, for many of you, for the first time. As you know, when I was in—in the State of the Union Address, I issued a challenge and as part of my explanation of the New Covenant in challenging citizens to be more responsible to people of faith and to religious leaders, specifically, to help us to deal with those problems that we have to deal with person by person and from the inside out, to help us to deal with the problems of teen pregnancy and out-of-wedlock birth, to help us to deal with the challenges of excessive violence, to help us to deal with the things that have to be organized and dealt with literally one by one at the grassroots level. And while I think we have to be more tolerant of all people, no matter what their differences are, we need to be less tolerant of conditions that are within our power to change.

And as you know now, for 2 years, ever since I took this job, I've been trying to find ways to galvanize the energies of people of faith to work together on a common agenda that nearly all Americans would agree on and, at the same time, to try to respect the differences of opinion and views. Our administration strongly supported the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, and we've worked very hard to implement it in a good faith way. And I think an awful lot of people from right across the spectrum of religious affiliations in our country would agree that we have done that.

Anyway, if you have any questions, I'd be glad to answer. But the other thing I was going to say today—what I said today was that the problems our country faces today are quite profound, you know, the fact that a rising tide is not lifting all boats; that a lot of people, in spite of this remarkable recovery, have not gotten a raise and they're more vulnerable with their health care, their pensions; and the fact that a lot of people find their values violated and their security violated by crime and violence and the breakdowns of the social order. It would be very hard to assert that there are more profound difficulties than the problems of previous